

Sermon: Sincerity Without Truth Is Worthless

Zeal for God

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I have never seen so much admission of the origin of Christmas as I have this year, and the massive shrugging off—"So what?" This is a sign, I think, that the world is just not caring anymore about truth.

When we consider and examine the present political correctness in light of Biblical teaching, we realize that all popular fallacies with respect to life and its troubles are but modern variants of the very old ideas. One of the most popular theories is one that is exposed and dealt with very clearly in the Bible.

The Apostle Paul's expression of concern for his fellow countrymen, the Jews, is very moving. He shows a lot of concern, of genuine love there. He was saddened at their persistent and obstinate refusal to believe the gospel. He felt that because of their privileged position with respect to their knowledge of God's way of life, their case was more tragic than that of any other people in the entire world. God had chosen them out of all nations and had given to them special prerogatives. The Scriptures had been entrusted to them, and they had been trained by a wonderful succession of prophets to look forward to the coming of a great Messiah and Deliverer.

Of all people, however, they had rejected Christ and still refused to believe the gospel concerning Him. They were looking forward to the coming of the Messiah but did not recognize Him when He came. They had declared themselves anxious to be just with God but rejected the one way whereby they could be justified before God. Paul expressed the explanation of that tragedy in his letter to the members in Rome:

Romans 10:1-3 Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not

according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.

Paul granted that their views were quite honest and sincere, at least from the world's perspective. The trouble with the Jews was not that they lacked sincerity, but rather that they put their trust in it. Because of their reliance on it, they neglected to consider the further light and knowledge that the gospel could give them on the thing that they wanted the most, and that was salvation. When speaking of sincerity throughout this sermon, I am speaking of it in its general sense; that is, I am using worldly sincerity, in the way that says that they truly believe what they are saying or doing and not that there is hypocrisy involved in it. Although there is much hypocrisy involved in people's lives, that is not the point in this sermon.

The Jews' difficulty was not that they lacked fervor, sincerity, and zeal, but that they trusted in it and argued that because they were zealous they were, therefore, of necessity, right. "They had a zeal for God but not according to knowledge." They rejected the knowledge that the gospel was offering them because of their zeal. The conflict in their case was between zeal and knowledge, between sincerity and truth. This gives an exact and precise description of the case of a great many people today, when people confuse sincerity and truth. In fact, many people equate sincerity with truth.

It is a perfect description of the predominating tendency in most mainstream religious thought, a tendency that Paul called both pathetic and dangerous. It is the tendency to equate sincerity and truth, to put up zeal and knowledge as equivalent terms. It is not stated in exactly that way, of course, but rather that, if a man is sincere and zealous, nothing else really matters. There is no doubt that these qualities, zeal and sincerity, are being exalted in society today as they were by the Jews in Paul's day, and that they are tests applied to everyone and every idea. It is involved in every aspect of everyone's lives.

Knowledge is being depreciated, almost despised. Clear, logical thinking and exact definitions are at a discount. We have seen that very clearly, especially in the political scene in the last year.

Doctrine is taboo and regarded as being almost the enemy of truth today, and it was even in Paul's day. Even good deeds are not given the prominence that they had just a few decades ago.

Isaiah 5:20-21 Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight!

This is exactly what those Jews of Paul's day were doing, and it is exactly what the religious leaders today are doing. Later in that chapter, we read that they are this way, "because they have rejected the law of the Lord of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel." Evildoers can be so blinded in their moral judgment that their evaluations of good and evil are the exact opposite of God's true perspective. Moral standards were destroyed by new definitions of sin. People do not use God's vocabulary, His definitions, but they use their own and reform definitions of their own words.

Like today's double-speak, this kind of language made it easy to deceive people and avoid a guilty conscience. In today's world, increased taxes are "revenue enhancements," and poor people are "fiscal underachievers." Medical malpractice is not the cause of a patient's death; it is a "diagnostic misadventure of high magnitude." Politically speaking, Fascism is now "Partnership" and Communism is now "Communitarian" or "Global Village." Thus, we see a re-writing of the definitions of the words with which we have been so familiar for most of our lives.

For anyone to ask a question about the truth of a statement is considered almost sacrilege, a sign of a legal, quarrelsome mind and spirit. The reply to all comments and queries is that the person is honest in his views, rather than wrong. Even a Communist is sincere in his views; even a Muslim terrorist is sincere in his views—but they are sincerely wrong! Nevertheless, society vindicates them.

Sincerity is the supreme test today, and what is demanded of everyone is not that he should hold the right view but that he should hold some views sincerely. Therefore, it is not uncommon to hear a phrase like this at the end of a discussion: "Of course, I did not agree with him, but that does not matter. He was obviously sincere." It may not be said in exactly those words, but that is the idea defending these people who are promoting what is politically correct.

For example, "global warming" is now being changed to "climate change," because they were so obviously exposed for their incorrect term *global warming* when the temperatures cooled. There are thirty thousand scientists that have signed a statement that global warming is one of the biggest scams to ever hit earth. Nine thousand of them have PhDs. There is plenty of truth behind them, but none of them will be given any voice in the media. This position has doubtless come about largely as a reaction to certain conditions that previously existed. That is just pop-culture reaction against mere theology, mere knowledge, mere morality, and mere truth.

The average person today hates insincerity and hypocrisy. He detests that type of person. He loathes the kind of individual whose morality is only skin deep and whose religion seems to be confined to only one day in seven. We have confusion in society, and that makes it tough to argue certain points. He feels that far too much of that kind of intellectual interest in religion and theology fails to express itself in practice. "Let a man's view be what it may; only let it be sincere," is the attitude of the pop-culture today. Thus, we see pop-culture criticizing those who are moral for not being sincere when they see hypocrisy in their lives.

Belief without honesty and morality without willpower are to the average person today the great evils. What is needed above all else, he feels, is genuineness, sincerity, a passion for rightness, whatever specific views one may hold. Of course, they must be the prevailing worldviews.

Sincerity is essential; without it we cannot hope to arrive at the truth. The sincerity I speak of in that sense is godly sincerity. We have a contrast between worldly sincerity and godly sincerity, and there is a major difference. The insincere person cannot defend it. To say that sincerity and truth are identical is to fall into an error just as dangerous as to hold the truth insincerely.

At this point, I want to take a moment to comment on the definition of *sincerity* relative to truth:

In Scripture, *sincere* signifies "freedom from hypocrisy; purity of motive." Since this is a biblical definition, I am defining godly sincerity. It is interesting that our English word *sincere* comes from the Latin word *sincerus*, meaning "without wax," because honey separated from the wax is considered perfectly pure. *Sincere* suggests "without mixture."

In I Corinthians 5:8, the apostle Paul speaks of sincerity and truth, or of purity and truth, as being the opposite of the leavened bread of malice and wickedness. Paul compared sincerity to unleavened bread, which is a biblical symbol of purity. The sincerity based on truth with which a Christian conducts his life is a testimony to his godliness. Paul says:

II Corinthians 1:12 For our boasting is this: the testimony of our conscience that we conducted ourselves in the world in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom but by the grace of God, and more abundantly toward you.

Sincerity is the opposite of double-mindedness or deceit. Paul criticized the false apostles with not preaching Jesus Christ sincerely, purely, and with upright emotion. The attitude of their heart was different from what they spoke through their lips. They were guilty of hypocrisy.

Philippians 1:15-18 Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from good will: The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains; but the latter out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice.

These people Paul is addressing were probably other Christians who preached a generally sound gospel but were personally at odds with Paul. Any number of things could have upset them or caused them to discount him, such as his poor speaking abilities or his constant suffering and weakness. Whatever their rationale, they were not motivated by love but only by a desire to harm Paul in some way. I speak of those who were the hypocrites, not those who had a worldly sincerity, which were the second group that he spoke about.

They may have been sincere in the human sense in that they were speaking what they believed, but they were not sincere in the godly sense; that is, they were not godly sincere, because they were not guided by the truth. Paul states the reason in verse 16: it was because of their ulterior motives, because of their selfish ambition. Sincerity is needed—it is essential—but when the contention is made, as it is being made today, that really nothing matters but honesty and a zeal for truth, then the

pendulum has swung right over to the other extreme, which is just as dangerous as the belief in truth only, without sincerity.

Let us consider this in detail, especially in the light of what Paul says about those who, in terms of zeal and sincerity, reject the gospel of Jesus Christ. Consider, first of all, the fallacy involved in those who place zeal in the position of knowledge and exalt sincerity to the place of truth. By fallacy, I mean primarily an intellectual and philosophical fallacy or error. Apart from its error in the sphere of religion, it is faulty and foolish when considered in any sphere or in any specific application in life. For one thing, it indicates failure on the part of such people to realize the true meaning and nature of zeal and sincerity.

What is zeal, anyway? What do earnestness and sincerity stand for? According to worldly sincerity, they stand for anything they can imagine. Certainly they are nothing more, and are meant to convey nothing more, than a description of the way that we perform a specific action or the way that we travel toward a certain destination. Earnestness and sincerity announce that our way of traveling is wholehearted and thorough, that there is no suspicion of lethargy or dishonesty about this way. We are obviously eager to arrive at our desired goal, and we strain every nerve and muscle in order to get there. This is zeal, honesty, and sincerity.

Look at another illustration: a man may preach the gospel sincerely or insincerely, or a man may advocate a political or social cause genuinely and honestly or because of some personal interest or some ulterior motive. It is only a description of the way that he performs or carries out any function; it is not concerned with the function as an end in itself.

Certainly, our objective in setting out on a journey is not merely to travel in a certain manner; we are not content until we arrive at the destination. The idea of a goal is exactly what is being forgotten today. For example, we decide that we are going to go to the Feast of Tabernacles, so we just get in the car and start driving. The problem is that, because we have not picked our goal of where we are headed, we could be headed anywhere. All the emphasis is on the zeal and the sincerity; the way in which we journey is regarded as being of greater importance than the destination. Traveling has become an objective in itself. It has become the goal.

As typical human beings, if we were offered, on one hand, the thrill and the joy of the quest for truth and, on the other, truth itself, would not the average person without hesitation choose the excitement of the quest? Of course he would! That is the major deceptive distraction of the world today. In contrast, the true Christian begins with truth so that he can determine his goal and direction and how he must get there.

The world's whole emphasis is on the quest and on the way in which he searches without the truth. Seeking has become more important than finding. Thus, sincerity and zeal are exalted above all else. Traveling in itself has become the object of desire. The goal is regarded as unimportant—almost an annoyance—because arriving at the goal, of necessity, means the end of this delightful and exhilarating quest. What a terrible perversion of thought, to say nothing of religion.

The Jesuits were condemned for centuries because they taught that "the end justifies the means," the very opposite of what I am speaking about here. It is still the code of the Jesuits today, but society today promotes the idea that the means alone matter and that the end does not count at all. To society, it does not matter what our ultimate view and idea may be, just so we are sincere.

This societal belief enables the powers behind the scene to carry out their "the end justifies the means" philosophy; they have definite agendas that they are following to arrive at world domination. There are political agendas, economic agendas, educational agendas, environmental agendas, and religious agendas, all working together only while it suits their individual purpose. For the mainstream person, what is being pushed is sincerity.

The world's objection that it is not quite fair to accuse society of believing that it does not matter what our ultimate view and idea may be so long as we are sincere is countered with the defense that the dominant view is really not that sincerity and zeal are in and of themselves the object of worship, but rather that the view is that sincerity is a guarantee of truth, that any view held quite sincerely must therefore be right. The argument is that, if we seek truth and reality sincerely, our very sincerity is a guarantee that we will ultimately arrive at our goal. This is a common humanly-reasoned fallacy.

The error here is greater than one might think. It does affect every single area of life, small and large. It is the error of thinking and imagining that it is one of the functions

of zeal and sincerity to determine the rightness or wrongness of the ultimate goal and of the direction that we are traveling, but that is not their function at all. Their business is to help us to arrive at that goal. Sincerity and zeal are to people what gasoline is to the car. They are nothing more than expressions of power and are therefore in no way competent to decide or to determine the right or wrong turns along the road, but that is exactly how they are being used today: to manipulate every one of us.

People look at their political or religious leader and say, "He is all out for the truth. He wants everything to be transparent. He does all he can. Notice his amazing zeal and sincerity." In mainstream Christianity, that seems to be where all the emphasis is. He is all out; and because he gives all his effort to his cause, it is taken for granted that he must be right, that he must know what he is talking about, and that he should in no way be criticized.

We saw this very thing happen with the Barak Hussein Obama obsession during the presidential campaign. Here is a man whose beliefs, desires, and political standing are a combination of the most oppressive forms of government: Fascism, Socialism, and Communism—all areas in which he has been heavily trained in his past. This combination is now referred to in terms such as "Partnership," the "Global Village," and "Communitarian."

The belief that someone is right because he has sincerity and zeal is as fallacious as saying that, because we are traveling very quickly along a certain road and because the gas pedal of the car is pushed all the way down, therefore we must of necessity be on the right road. Poppycock! The rate of speed and method of traveling are no guarantee that we are on the right road. It is not within the competence of sincerity and zeal to determine the rightness or the wrongness of the view that we hold.

This point is seen still more clearly when we realize that zeal and sincerity can be right or wrong and still remain zeal and sincerity. In other words, we must not forget that we can be sincerely wrong and quite genuinely mistaken. Herbert Armstrong used to have a comment about those in mainstream Christianity. He would say, "They are sincere, but they are sincerely wrong".

The biblical instance that comes to mind is the case of the apostle Paul before his conversion. He tells us repeatedly that in the days before his conversion, when he

persecuted the church of God, massacred Christians, and did his utmost to exterminate the church, he was perfectly sincere. He did it with a clear conscience.

Acts 23:1 Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, "Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day."

He not only thought that he was right; he was certain that he was right. He believed from the depths of his being that he was pleasing God. He was sincere and zealous. He was totally committed. There was no trace of hypocrisy or of shame in his action. Before his conversion, he was Saul of Tarsus, the honest zealot for the Jewish high counsel.

On the way to Damascus, though, he suddenly came to see that he had been terribly and tragically wrong. He saw that his whole direction had been wrong, and he immediately turned completely around to finally face, for the first time in his life, the truth. Afterwards, he worked and traveled with equal enthusiasm in exactly the opposite direction. The sincerity and the zeal remained the same, but the direction given to them was entirely different. Before his conversion, Paul was sincerely wrong in condemning Christians. After his conversion, he was sincerely right and moving in the right direction at breakneck speed.

That a person is sincere is, therefore, no guarantee of righteousness, and to make it the standard and the ultimate test is just to throw logic and clear thinking to the wind. Many of the greatest cruelties and excesses recorded in both ancient and modern history must be attributed to sincerity and zeal not governed and controlled by truth. In other words, what seems to have been forgotten is that we can say of sincerity what is said of fire in the old adage: "Fire is a good servant but a bad master." As long as it is under control, nothing is more valuable than fire. We can heat our rooms, cook our meals, and perform an endless number of beneficial actions with it. However, once fire ceases to be under control and it becomes the master, it leads to nothing but destruction and chaos.

The case is precisely the same with sincerity. When knowledge and truth are in control, nothing is finer or more important than sincerity; but if we hand control to sincerity itself, it may lead us hopelessly astray and even to disaster. That is what happened to the apostle Paul before his conversion. That was the trouble with the Jews of his own day. They had sincerity but not according to knowledge—not

according to truth. It was not being directed by God. It was sincerity without true sight or vision.

Today, most people are pushing ahead in this supposedly great quest for truth and reality. They protest that they are sincere and genuine, that they are "all out for the truth," but they do not know where they are going.

You may remember the incident in Alice in Wonderland, when Alice asks the Cheshire Cat for help:

Alice: Oh, no, no. I was just wondering if you could help me find my way.

Cheshire Cat: Well that depends on where you want to get to.

Alice: Oh, it really doesn't matter, as long as...

Cheshire Cat: Then it really doesn't matter which way you go.

One might say that Alice had a great sincerity to find her way home, but it was not of the truth, of knowledge. Because she did not know the way, it did not matter which way that she went.

It is foolish to move forward without the right goal and direction. It is false reasoning to trust only in sincerity and zeal undirected by the knowledge of God. Let us consider for a moment the futility of this position. Let us consider what a terrible waste of energy is involved when sincerity and zeal are undirected by knowledge and truth. For instance, if we are concerned about scientific experimentation, to trust only eagerness and sincerity in the quest for results without having a certain amount of knowledge is useless and may even be very dangerous. In any area of life, knowledge is essential; and mere fervency apart from truth cannot produce the desired result. When we realize that we are concerned ultimately with God and with pleasing Him, how infinitely more important it is to realize that knowledge of His will and His purpose with respect to us is absolutely vital before we move on to any action at all.

This truth can be demonstrated in two main ways. Paul's argument with respect to the views of those in the first century A.D. was, first of all, that by trusting as they did to their zeal and sincerity apart from knowledge, they succeeded in doing absolutely nothing to establishing their own righteousness. The cause of their error, Paul says, was that they were ignorant of God's righteousness. They were ignorant

not only of God's way of salvation, but of what God really demands. Jesus Christ once brought precisely the same charge against the Pharisees:

Luke 16:14-15 Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, also heard all these things, and they derided Him. And He said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God."

Could anything be so futile and useless as this ignorance of the Jews at the time of Jesus Christ? There they were, with all their zeal and sincerity, their good works and morality, and it was useless to them. They were not on their way to salvation.

Their ignorance of the truth caused them suffering. They prayed, fasted, and gave their goods to feed the poor. Yet their diligent works were of little or no value, because they were not done according to the proper attitude and in truth. The Jews had set up their own standards. They were working according to their own ideas and traditions; and having done all, they were able to point to great achievements and to an abundance of right actions without right motives in many cases, especially with right direction.

Their working according to their own ideas and traditions was only a promotion of their own form of rightness and not the righteousness that God demanded. What made it even more futile and vain was that they had persuaded themselves that it was all for God. They set out to please God and to justify themselves before Him but, in the end, all they had done was to please themselves—all because they would not listen to what God had said, all because they trusted in their own zeal, and because they trusted in their own ideas.

Not surprisingly, since the same human nature exists now, most people do the same thing today. They ignore God's Word. They refuse to consider God's Truth with its light and its knowledge. Most people avoid worshipping God and every form of biblical instruction with respect to these matters. They argue that all that is necessary is for us to be sincere—but that is not all that is necessary. Worship of God is not acceptable if it is not based on truth.

It is easy to see the parallels in the human reasoning of the Jews of the first century A.D. with the human reasoning of religious leaders today. Let me illustrate this with

regard to the celebration of Christmas as a "Christian" holiday. Does Christmas teach us the truth?

There are so many falsehoods and deceptions embedded in this holiday that God sees this celebration as an abomination. "For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God." Truth is very important to Him. It is one of the names of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." It is also one of His ministry's themes: "And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." Conversely, lies bind us in spiritual slavery. This is what Jesus Christ revealed to the apostle John:

Revelation 21:27 But there shall by no means enter it [the New Jerusalem] anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

From its non-Christian, pagan background, we can see that Christmas is a syncretistic blend of pagan rites and "Christian" themes that is an abomination to God. It is a quagmire of deceptive traditions. In ignorance, many people celebrate it sincerely, but because truth is not in them they are "sincerely" wrong.

Deuteronomy 12:29-32 "When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.' You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it."

Many historical sources show that Christmas was not observed by Christians from Christ's time to the fourth century A.D. Saturnalia (December 17-24) and Brumalia (December 25) continued as a pagan celebration by the Romans well into the fourth century. The *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1911 edition, in the article "Natal Day," records that the early Catholic Church father, Origen, acknowledged,

In the Scriptures, no one is recorded to have kept a feast or held a great banquet on His [Jesus Christ's] birthday. It is only sinners like Pharaoh and Herod who make great rejoicings over the day in which they were born into this world.

The two biblical examples mentioning the birthday of both Pharaoh and Herod represent horrible events. Pharaoh hanged his chief baker on his birthday, and Herod cut off John the Baptizer's head and served it on a platter to Herodias' daughter, as she demanded. This is part of the reason why the Church of God does not celebrate birthdays. We may acknowledge them in various ways, but we certainly do not throw parties for one another and shower the birthday boy or girl with gifts in great rejoicing.

Neither does the Church of God give gifts to one another on what is wrongly claimed to be Christ's birthday. That is what the narcissistic world does. Satan the great deceiver influences his world by placing a great deal of emphasis on self-indulgence.

In a radio interview with an ex-Satan worshipper, the interviewer asked, "After Halloween, what is the most important day to a Satan worshipper?" His reply came without hesitation, "Your own birthday!" That is very revealing.

John 8:44-46 "You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe Me. Which of you convicts Me of sin? And if I tell the truth, why do you not believe Me?"

During the fourth century, the emperor Constantine "converted" to "Christianity" and changed Sabbath-keeping from the seventh to the first day of the week. Sunday was the day that he had worshipped the sun as his god. This made it easier for the Romans to call their pagan December 25 winter solstice festival (in which they had celebrated the birth of the sun god) to the birthday of the "Son of God." The *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1967 edition, says,

According to the hypothesis . . . accepted by most scholars today, the birth of Christ was assigned the date of the winter solstice (December 25 in the Julian calendar, January 6 in the Egyptian), because on this day, as the sun began its return to

northern skies, the pagan devotees of Mithra celebrated the *dies natalis Solis Invicti* (birthday of the Invincible Sun). On Dec. 25, 274 AD, Aurelian had proclaimed the sun-god principal patron of the empire and dedicated a temple to him in the Campus Martius. Christmas originated at a time when the cult of the sun was particularly strong at Rome.

It was not until the fifth century that the Roman Catholic church ordered that the birth of Christ be observed on December 25, the day of the old Roman feast of the birth of Sol, the sun god. They renamed it "Christmas." In Ecclesiastes 1:15, King Solomon wrote, "What is crooked, cannot be made straight." Christmas certainly is crooked. Its basis is crooked; its foundation is corrupt. How in the world can anyone apply Jesus Christ's name to that holiday?

The pagan origin of Christmas and the traditional perversions surrounding this holiday should be an obvious reason to avoid this epitome of paganism. However, there is much more to it than origin and history.

What human being has the right to decide what God wants? If we were to celebrate Christ's birth, the Bible, God's instruction book to mankind, would command us to do so. Yet nowhere in the Bible are we told to celebrate the birth of Christ! Scripture does not even tell us when it was! It certainly was not in the middle of winter.

In John 13:15, Christ gives us an important principle, "For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you." We have no example of Christ ever celebrating birthdays in connection with holy days or feasts or for any other reason. In fact, He says, "In vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." Birthday celebrations may be observed by sincere people, but it is not based on the truth of the Bible, and it glorifies the created, rather than the Creator and Sustainer!

Also, the celebration of Christmas is spiritually misleading. The emphasis on the "mother and child" distracts from the Father-Son relationship that God's Word focuses on. Immediately a person is being taken off in the wrong direction. Christ is reduced to a helpless Baby, while the human being Mary is deified and revered. Even Mary's husband, Joseph, is given more attention than Christ's real Father, the great God of heaven and earth!

Christmas-keepers claim that they give gifts on that day because Christ received gifts. In reality, the wise men brought gifts to the King of the Jews, not when He was born or when He was an infant, but later when He was a young child. The gifts were not given to honor His birth but to show esteem to the new King of kings, as was the custom in the Middle East.

In addition, the wise men did not exchange gifts with each other. Why then do people today exchange gifts? Because the origins of these customs are based in paganism! It is interesting to note that offerings to churches decline at this time of year, because people are spending their money on each other and themselves.

The most detrimental part of this holiday is that it actually turns people's hearts away from God and pushes them closer to the god of this world. By receiving numerous gifts and by drunkenness and gluttony, individuals are self-gratified, which inevitably leads to sin and crime. Sin separates us from God; it does not promote a closer relationship with Him. Police forces work rigorously to cope with the increased murders, suicides, robberies, and domestic disturbances. We can see that the fruit of violence and self-gratification shows us whom this holiday really worships: Satan the Deceiver, who deceives the whole world.

Jeremiah 17:9-10 "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings."

I fear for even those sincere people who keep these worldly holidays, because of what it says right here: "Even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings." The fruit of this revelry should in and of itself show us that this holiday is in no way related to the Father and Son of Righteousness. Their Holy Days lead to peace, joy, hope, and spiritual growth, the very opposite traits that come out of Christmas. There is a lot of peace and joy that is touted, but it is all speech. That is why God instructed the Israelites not to follow pagan customs or worship Him as the heathen do. He says in Deuteronomy 12:31-32, "You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way. . . . Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it."

God knows that ungodly practices like these will not produce the purity of character that He desires to see in each of us. James uses an analogy to express this principle that something pure cannot originate from what is impure:

James 3:11-12 Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring can yield both salt water and fresh.

Why meddle with the paganism in Christmas when we can enjoy the purity of God's real Holy Days revealed in His Word? By following God's instruction, we grow in developing the true and godly character that God expects in us. Because any zeal that the world has for God is not according to truth, it establishes its own object of worship. We see this same thing happening today in preparation for the one-world religion.

Romans 10:2-3 For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.

To those who believe that sincerity is more important than truth, we must say what Paul said to his contemporaries, that having done all, they are simply establishing their own "righteousness." It is not God's way. It is not God's idea of righteousness, but simply their own.

Surely the essence of wisdom is that before we begin to act or attempt to please God, we should discover what God says about the matter. What is His idea of righteousness? People today, however, like the Jews of Paul's day, take their orders from everywhere except from God's Word. They rely on the philosophy and statements of certain popular social engineers and live according to their own ideas rather than according to the teachings of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Notice what Jesus says about people who want to worship Him without obedience to God's commands:

Mark 7:7-9 "'And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men—the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you

do." He said to them, "All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition."

Man would rather do anything else than surrender himself to God. His natural mind rebels at the thought of submitting to God's law.

Romans 8:7-8 Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

The *carnal mind* means every single person's mind. The word *carnal* just means "meat." This brings us to the absolute necessity that God call a person out of the world and that he receives the Holy Spirit, the mind of God. Then he is able to understand the commandments of God. We take one look at the world, at mainstream Christianity, and we see the lack of understanding there. It saddens us very deeply, because we know what is coming and what those people will have to go through.

People have substituted their own laws and customs for God's commandments, thinking that, if they are sincere, they can still receive salvation by doing nothing more than believing that Christ exists. In James, it tells us that even the demons believe that God exists.

Human nature wants to be right, but it does not necessarily want to do right! If it "looks right" or it "feels right" to them, it becomes their law. Remember the saying in the '60s, "If it feels good, do it"? This is nothing short of self-righteousness, and we already know where doing what "seems right" to us leads, unless we repent of this kind of thinking. "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death."

Another way that we can demonstrate the futility of such trusting of zeal at the expense of knowledge is to remind ourselves of the standard set for us by God. Paul reminded the members in Rome what Moses, in giving the law to the Israelites, had said:

Romans 10:5 For Moses writes about the righteousness which is of the law, "The man who does those things shall live by them."

Paul's point is that anyone who can perform it shall live by it. If you are a living, breathing human being and you are capable of keeping the law, then you had better live by it. God has given His law, His standard of righteousness, and said, in effect, "If you keep all that, you will have followed My commandments. That is what I require as the only way to please Me."

What is that way? It is obvious. Consider it deeply. We talk about pleasing God by our own sincere efforts. Well, consider what we should do.

Can any human being atone for his own past sins and errors? Can anyone blot out his own transgressions? Does he always live up to his own standard? Can he control his thoughts, his desires, inclinations, and imaginations as well as his own actions? In other words, by his greatest efforts, can he and does he succeed in really living up to his own standard of life? For example, we have the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and man fails miserably at living by them. Man cannot even live by his own laws.

Then consider God's standard. Read the law as given to the children of Israel, the Ten Commandments and the moral law, that the apostle Paul, prior to his conversion, with all his zeal, could not keep, until he saw their true meaning by having them revealed to him. Then read the Sermon on the Mount and Christ's various other teachings about the holiness of God. Then contemplate Christ's own perfect life. That is what we have to do. That is the righteousness that we have to try to attain, that is what "go on to perfection" means, as Paul wrote in Hebrews 6:1.

Can anyone do it on his own? Can all the good intentions, all the sincerity, all the zeal of which anyone is capable ever provide sufficient power to attain such high spiritual standards and such perfection? That is the mountain we should be trying to climb, the mountain of the holiness of God. Without holiness, no one will see God.

Hebrews 12:14-17 Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears.

Even Esau's greatest efforts could not undo what he had wasted. Not even his most fervent, sincere zeal could acquire what God was no longer willing to give because of his disdain for God's righteous way of life. Esau was no doubt very sincere when he realized what he had so easily given up.

Consider finally the tragedy of this position. The tragedy lies in the fact that all this misery is unnecessary in view of the knowledge that is available. The thing that made the apostle Paul feel this so strongly, was the fact that he had experienced it all himself, as he tells us in so many places in his writings, and sermons. He knew what it was to trust his own zeal and sincerity, and his own efforts.

He knew all about the striving and the sweating, the fasting and all the great efforts. He knew also the feelings of hopelessness. He knew the failure to find satisfaction. Then he experienced the miraculous release that came to him with the knowledge and understanding of God's Truth. When he had God's truth and he applied that sincerity and zeal to it, he was unstoppable.

He saw his fellow countrymen still going on in their old way, still guilty of the old fallacy of tradition, still striving to do the impossible. He looked at them and saw their zeal and their great effort. It saddened him. What a tragedy—all that zeal and sincerity, but of no value. They tried to justify themselves, but they never could. While they were trying and failing, they were deliberately refusing the knowledge that could give them, in reality, everything that they desired and more. It was bad enough that all of that energy and effort was a sheer waste, but the tragedy was heightened and made infinitely greater by the contemplation of what they might have been if they had accepted the Truth, the Word of God.

They not only failed, but they also refused to be made successful. They preferred to trust themselves, their own zeal, and their own efforts and fail, rather than trust themselves to Jesus Christ, the very Messiah for whom they had waited so long. They were so eager to do things themselves that they refused God's offer of eternal salvation as a free gift, if they would turn from their ways.

Salvation was available and being offered by the apostles and other church elders in their preaching of the Word of God. Basically, they had to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God and that He had died to atone for their sins and had risen from the grave in order to justify them. They had to change from their own way

of life and accept God's way of life. If they did this, they would receive what they were humanly trying to accomplish through their own misguided sincerity. They had been sincere, but sincerely wrong! They said that they wanted to be right with God, yet they deliberately refused the one way of being put right with God.

What of people today? Are they not in the same frame of mind and in the same position? They are trusting in themselves for salvation from this world, by their own sincerity and efforts. Consider the task that faces us and what is demanded of us. It is all entirely impossible for us by our own efforts, no matter how sincere we may be.

Romans 10:2-3 For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.

"Zeal for God" means passionate devotion in the things pertaining to God or, in a very general sense, in the things of religion. No doubt many of the Jews were sincere, but sincerity does not of itself constitute true godliness.

John 16:1-3 "These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble. They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me."

Sincere without knowledge, zealous without truth—this type of dedication is an instance of extraordinary zeal; and in this, most are sincere. However, persecution to death of the apostles and the saints cannot be sincerity in truth. So many people believe that, provided they are sincere and zealous, they must be accepted by God. The zeal that is acceptable is that which does all to the glory of God. Its primary aim is not to promote oneself, as the Jews did, or to build up one's own church, as many others do.

The descendants of the Israelites have always had a problem of zeal and sincerity that does not lead them to salvation. Look what the Israelites have accomplished down through history. Of course, I do not speak of only the Jews, who are well known for many of the inventions of the world. I speak of the Israelites throughout

the world, as a whole. The broader principle here is simple: that many sincere, "religious" people are wrong in their beliefs.

Jesus and the apostles foretold, not a universal, widespread popular growth of the true New Testament church, but a falling away from the truth on the part of the great majority. Prophesying a popular, universal falling away from the faith once delivered is what Paul did:

II Thessalonians 2:7-12 For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming. The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

Paul says that this happens "because they did not receive the love of the truth" and that they "did not believe the truth." Many of these people are sincere, but they are sincerely wrong, because of their enmity against God. Paul wrote this a mere thirty years after the church began, and look how quickly it was necessary to deal with this problem of straying from the truth.

One of Paul's themes in his epistle to the Philippians is that a proper spiritual outlook is critical for progress in the faith.

Philippians 1:9-11 And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Notice how Paul expresses the concept that truth is necessary in order to be truly sincere. He describes and expands truth by his phrase, "abound still more and more in knowledge [truth] and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent [truth], that you may be sincere." Paul prays that they might have mature Christian character, "sincere and without offense."

The Greek word translated *sincere* may have several meanings. The word *eilikrineia*, which translates "sincerity," is compounded of *eilee*, "the splendor of the sun," and *krinoo*, "judge": a thing which may be examined in the clearest and strongest light, without the possibility of detecting a single flaw or imperfection. Some translate it "tested by sunlight." The sincere Christian is not afraid to "stand in the light!"

Sincere may also mean "to whirl in a sieve," suggesting the idea of a winnowing process that removes chaff. In both cases, the truth is the same: Paul prays that His friends will have the kind of character that can pass that kind of test.

Our all is not enough, if its sincerity is misguided. Zeal and sincerity without true knowledge, which comes alone through Jesus Christ, are vain and futile. Sincerity without truth is worthless, but sincerity based on truth has the right direction and the zeal to pursue the right goal. Sincerity with truth helps us "seek first the kingdom of God"—the kingdom of truth! Let us have a zeal for God according to knowledge and according to truth.

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